

Maj. Gen. Torrence Saxe

Commissioner & Adjutant General

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The Alaska National Guard safely delivers Christmas gifts to three remote villages, honoring Op Santa 65-year tradition

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska — The Alaska National Guard shared their time-honored tradition of Operation Santa Claus by spreading goodwill and joy to remote Alaskan communities again this year. Despite the challenges of a global pandemic, they delivered gifts from Santa Claus to three villages last week and today.

With the difficulties presented by COVID-19, the Alaska National Guard, in partnership with the Salvation Army, found a way to maintain the program by delivering it differently this year. They took necessary precautions to ensure safety, while staying committed to the mission of spreading joy and friendship with rural villages experiencing hardship. This year's iteration of Op Santa shared the Christmas spirit with the villages of Birch Creek, Stevens Village, and Nanwalek. According to available records, none of the three villages have previously been visited by the Op Santa program.

"Our commitment to rural communities through Op Santa is a priority every holiday season," said Maj. Gen. Torrence Saxe, adjutant general of the Alaska National Guard. "We found a way to conduct the mission this year safely and effectively, while still sharing in the joy of the season with our neighbors."

2020 marks the 65th year of the program, which began in 1956 after spring floods, followed by a drought, impacted subsistence fishing and hunting, requiring St. Mary's Mission to purchase food. This created a challenge for them to provide Christmas gifts for the children, so the National Guard flew in donated gifts and supplies.

"The Alaska National Guard has shared Operation Santa Claus with communities in remote Alaska since 1956," said Lt. Col. Candis Olmstead, the project officer for Op Santa. "It started in the village of St. Mary's when they experienced a year of particular hardship and they still wanted to provide gifts for the children at their school, so the Anchorage community came together and gathered up gifts and the Alaska Air National Guard flew the gifts out to the village."

For this year's program, volunteers from the Alaska National Guard and the Salvation Army worked like Santa's elves, packaging up presents donated by the community. Each child in all three villages received backpacks containing a wrapped gift, books and stocking stuffers. These backpacks were put into boxes that also contained puzzles, board games, coffee and nonperishable food items for the families.

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For the first two deliveries, an Army Guard C-12 Huron flew gifts from JBER to Fairbanks International Airport, where they were ground transported to Fort Wainwright and loaded to an Army Guard UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter for a final, special delivery. After the scheduled flight cancelled due to unfavorable weather conditions, the mission was successfully completed the next day on Dec. 2, delivering boxes of goodies to Birch Creek, a village with only five children, and Stevens Village, a community with nine children.

A CH-47 Chinook helicopter participated in Op Santa for the very first time this year by delivering gifts to Nanwalek Dec. 11. The Alaska Army National Guard acquired the CH-47 helicopters two years ago this month, and they have undergone extensive maintenance, training flights and missions with newly trained, yet highly experienced aircrews.

"This is the first year that one of our new Army National Guard Chinook helicopters participated in Op Santa," said Olmstead, "We're excited for them to carry on our long-standing tradition of delivering gifts to Alaskans in rural communities with military aircraft."

Due to COVID-19 precautionary measures, the Guardsmen and volunteers delivered gifts to the villages for their distribution to the children. None of the personnel involved in the missions interacted closely with the local citizens, maintaining a safe distance.

"We offloaded the boxes, flew off and then the folks from the villages came in to pick up the boxes," said Olmstead. "This limited our interaction with them to ensure their safety."

Despite the limitations involved in trying to prevent the spread of COVID-19, it was important to the Alaska National Guard and the Salvation Army to continue the tradition.

"We wanted to keep our commitment to the program and the communities alive, despite the challenges of a pandemic," explained Saxe. "The children and families are so excited and appreciative, and we really enjoy sharing in the spirit of the holiday season, continuing to grow relationships with all Alaskans."

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PHOTOS

1. **Flickr link** includes an event album with the complete selection of full-resolution, free downloadable images. (May not be accessible from all military computers.)

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/alaskanationalguard/albums/72157717260444001>

2. **DVIDS link** includes selected full-resolution photos. (Accessible from military computers.)

<https://www.dvidshub.net/news/384847/alaska-national-guard-safely-delivers-christmas-gifts-three-remote-villages-honoring-op-santa-65-year-tradition>

3. **DVIDS links** to videos. <https://www.dvidshub.net/video/776365/alaska-national-guard-safely-prepares-christmas-gifts-three-remote-villages-operation-santa-claus>

<https://www.dvidshub.net/video/776373/alaska-national-guard-safely-delivers-christmas-gifts-three-remote-villages-honoring-op-santa-65-year-tradition>



The Alaska National Guard brought joy to remote Alaskan villages delivering gifts to Stevens Village, Birch Creek and Nanwalek as a part of the 65th annual Operation Santa Claus. Members of the Birch Creek Community came out to greet the aircrew from a safe distance and watch the UH-60 Black Hawk landing and take-off. The Black Hawk aircrew flew out of Fairbanks, Alaska, continuing the tradition and safely provided gifts despite COVID-19. The tradition started in 1956 after spring floods and has continued to serve Alaska rural communities. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Senior Master Sgt. Julie Avey)

Sgt. Peter Phillip, Alaska National Guard UH-60 Black Hawk Crew Chief, serves as an elf to deliver packages as a part of the 65th annual tradition of Operation Santa Claus. The Alaska National Guard brings joy to remote Alaskan villages delivering gifts to Stevens Village, Birch Creek and Nanwalek. The Alaska National Guard UH-60 aircrew flew out of Fairbanks, Alaska, continuing the tradition and safely provided gifts despite COVID-19. The tradition started in 1956 after spring floods and has continued to serve Alaska rural communities. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Senior Master Sgt. Julie Avey)



Soldiers from 1st Battalion, 207th Aviation Regiment, Alaska Army National Guard, unload gifts from a CH-47 Chinook helicopter in Nanwalek, Alaska during Operation Santa Claus, Dec. 11. Operation Santa Claus is an Alaska National Guard annual community outreach program that provides Christmas gifts, books, school supplies and stocking stuffers to children in rural Alaskan communities. This year marks the 65th year of the program, which began in 1956 after the village of St. Mary's experienced a year of hardship and the Alaska Air National Guard flew in gifts and supplies donated by the local community. The Alaska National Guard was able to continue the tradition this year and safely provide gifts despite COVID-19. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Edward Eagerton/Released)

Jenni Ragland (second from left), the service extension director for the Salvation Army, Chief Master Sgt. Winfield Hinkley Jr., the command senior enlisted leader for the Alaska National Guard, and his family all lend a hand in wrapping gifts Nov. 17 for Operation Santa Claus 2020. Operation Santa Claus is an Alaska National Guard annual community outreach program that provides Christmas gifts, books, school supplies and stocking stuffers to children in rural Alaskan communities. This year marks the 65th year of the program, which began in 1956 after the village of St. Mary's experienced a year of hardship and the Alaska Air National Guard flew in gifts and supplies donated by the local community. The Alaska National Guard was able to continue the tradition this year and safely provide gifts despite COVID-19. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Dana Rosso/Released)

